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ABSTRACT

The development of alternative instructional activities for use in the basic writing classroom and a description and analysis of four levels of basic writing are the results of a study of basic writing teaching techniques. The linguistic concepts of immediate and transferred utterances and nominal-verbal pairing, and the work of L. Vygotsky on inner and external speech, support the premise that giving form to fragmented concepts and ideas is a sophisticated process transformation of bits and pieces of thought into syntactically articulated discourse that basically involves writing and connecting sentences. The four levels of basic writing can be defined as: (1) the simple transcription of inner speech; (2) transcription of inner speech with nominals inserted; (3) use of the simple sentence as the primary tool of discourse with simple addition as the only rhetorical device; and (4) use of sentences with some coordination and subordination as connecting devices. Instructional activities in the basic writing classroom should include emphasizing ways to connect sentences rather than to construct sentences bringing sentence patterns to students' attention so nominal-verbal pairing might appear in their writing, suggesting punctuation that continues rather than ends a sentence, and using sentence exercises only as they affect the rhetorical connections the students attempt. (Samples of student writing and their writing level characteristics are included.) (AEA)

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A Repeal of the Basic Writing Act

While I was thinking over my notes for this paper, I thought I'd better consider how it would fit into the framework of this session--I thought I'd better be able to say something about what I'm doing for my Basic Writers. And I thought about how for a long time, nearly five years, I had been suckered by writing lab philosophies, BW texts and my own materials in Flagler's writing lab into believing that teaching the sentence or teaching grammar was the best thing I could do for my BWs. In shabby defense of such beliefs, I suppose that it is in the very nature of a response to any BW sample to throw one's hands up and declare, unequivocally, "This kid needs to learn to write a sentence!" But that kind of statement and that kind of thinking infers that I must do something to my students before I can do something for them; somehow, it presumes that there's something I must teach before I teach writing.

Because I've always believed that writing is a process, and because I've always tried to teach my students to discover what happens to them when they undergo that psycho-social activity we call writing, I first thought that I might be able to describe BW as a type, a kind of unfinished writing somewhere on its way through a version of the writing process. At an NEH Summer Seminar in 1977, I tried that, and I succeeded, but only partially--I devised a model of the writing process into which BW would fit as the initial result of some prewriting or invention activity. But that wasn't enough. It still didn't tell

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me why, in my gut, I continue to believe that teaching sentences and grammar and correctness as the major emphases in BW is a disservice to my students. My model still didn't tell me why doing things to BWs before we could do things for them seemed at the very worst a waste of time, and at the very best, a kink in my own philosophy of education, a kink with which I could not live.

Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations helped me, of course, to understand BW as writing, but I found myself disagreeing with her especially in her chapter entitled "Beyond the Sentence" wherein she explains the way in which she went about increasing her students' syntactic options; I could not agree with her on the starting point of instruction. It seemed true to me that Shaughnessy did not describe the range of BWs with whom I was faced, and while her descriptions were helpful, I needed my own descriptions of my own BWs that would lead me to an analysis of the kinds of writers populating my classes, the kind of descriptions that would help me explain my beliefs. So, for the past few months, I've been looking for angles, frameworks, perspectives, within which my ideas would fit comfortably.

What you are about to listen to then are my preliminary findings, what led me to the description and analyses of the four levels, samples of which you are holding, to the explanation of why I believe that my appreach to sentence instruction had been wrong, and what alternative instructional activities might help turn BW into writing that is not basic.

From Structural Grammar, I borrowed two concepts: utterance, immediate and transferred, and nominal-verbal pairing. Immediate utterances, as defined by John Hughes in The Science of Language (New York: Random House, 1962), are amounts of speech "put forth by a single person before and after which there is

maximum silence." (p. 146) To some extent in conversation speakers might omit nominal, verbal, adjectival or adverbial elements because the social conditions surrounding dialogues fill in any contextual gaps left by any omission of these elements. Then, it would follow that in order to report a conversation to listeners who are unfamiliar with the context surrounding the dialogue, speakers must reinsert all omitted elements. Amounts of speech characterized by full nominal-verbal pairing and modification may be termed transferred utterances. The primary unit of context or form is, of course, the sentence, or what I choose to call the nominal-verbal pair for my analysis. In addition, not only must immediate utterances be translated into transferred utterances in a report; a number of other nominal-verbal pairs must be generated to insure that the entire conversation might be reported in a context understandable to the listener.

Let me illustrate with a sample dialogue that goes like this:

"Wanna study with me?"
"Naw. Too tired."
"Y'sure? Sure could use some help."
"Find someone else, will ya?"
"C'mon, just for a few minutes."
"Leeme alone, will ya? I'm tired."

Simply explained, these are samples of immediate utterances which would be comprehensible to the speakers not necessarily because the utterances are fully marked and inflected, but because the speakers understand one another's personalities, and any syntactic omissions are compensated for by the mutually familiar social context.

Now, I will formalize a version of that same conversation creating a context outside the one that is presupposed by the speakers:

"Two young men are sitting in their dorm room in the evening, one of them, Bill, at his desk, the other, Mike, half-asleep on his bed. Bill opens a book and notebook, scans the pages and asks Mike to study with him. Mike refuses, explaining that he's too tired to study and

that he's going to sleep for a while. Bill interprets Mike's response, perhaps falsely, as a conditional statement and reinforces his request by saying that he could benefit from Mike's help. Mike rolls over and tells Bill to find someone else to study with. Bill, however, continues his entreaty by informing Mike that he'll need help for just a few minutes. Mike becomes angry and firmly rejects Bill's request by demanding that Bill leave him alone so that he can get the sleep he feels he needs."

As you can see, my report of the original conversation first must expand the immediate utterances of the dialogue into transferred utterances with all the omitted elements inserted; second, it must generate a number of other full nominal-verbal pairs to provide contextual connections between the utterances themselves. To make the report understandable to someone unfamiliar with the personalities of the speakers, I must somehow generate enough full nominal-verbal pairs to allow the listener to comprehend the social conditions that surround the original dialogue.

To clarify a bit more, I've been able to draw some correspondances between these linguistic concepts and the work Lev Vygotsky describes in chapter seven of his book Thought and Language (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975). Vygotsky differentiates between inner speech, or speech for oneself, the kind of speaking one might hear from a three-year-old, and external speech, or speech for others, the kind of speech we find mirrored in extended discourse. Vygotsky claims, and I believe, that we never lose our inner speech, that we merely stop vocalizing it by about the age of seven. Characteristically, inner speech exhibits the following:

1) Predication is its primary grammatical form, and there is a resultant lack of nominals along with perhaps a multiplicity of verbals and modifiers; and

2) The meaning of utterances is condensed in that there is a vague sense rather than a meaning attached to words; words in inner speech

become saturated with meanings.

Furthermore, and this is important to my analysis, inner speech is not simply a reflection of external speech; it is a function of disconnected, incomplete utterances with their own rules of operation; therefore, turning inner speech into external speech is not a matter of simple translation. It is a sophisticated process transformation of bits and pieces of thought into syntactically articulated discourse.

These characteristics of inner speech also describe immediate utterances. I may even go so far as to say that, for my analysis, inner speech consists of immediate utterances and external speech consists of transferred utterances.

Now, to the meat of the matter: how do these concepts relate to an analysis of BW? I am making the assumption that at some time or another, we think in language, particularly true I believe when we are confronted with writing problems. And, for my analysis, I am making the further assumption that because we know subconsciously our own social, political or economic situations, at first, at some initial point in the writing process, we think in the immediate utterances of inner speech--we don't need to provide contexts for our own private thoughts. These immediate utterances represent our ideas, sketchy, fragmented concepts that we harbor in our minds. When we seek to write these concepts, we give form to them by performing two root operations:

1) writing sentences, which means translating fragmented immediate utterances into full nominal-verbal transferred utterances; and

2) connecting sentences, which means generating related transferred utterances by exercising traditional syntactic and rhetorical options to provide a smooth coherent context for the reader.

I can illustrate these operations by explaining what happens to

my regular comp students while they're writing. After I make an assignment, I ask to see notes and drafts which I review as part of course work. Their notes appear in pieces, fragments, sometimes sentences, always idea statements usually in the form of immediate utterances. These pieces are usually the result of prewriting processes during which I invariably see my students writing to themselves in language similar to what Vygotsky calls inner speech. When, at some point in their notes, full nominal-verbal pairing appears, their sentences begin connecting, their ideas begin developing, and they are well on their way to creating drafts, which predict a context or form a reader can understand. It is at this point that operation 1 is nearly complete, although they return to operation 1 again and again as they write, but operation 2 has only begun. When they have completed what they believe are drafts, generally I ask them to outline what they've written so that they might have a blueprint of the forms their ideas are taking; I ask them to question the connections between sentences, to question the rhetorical movement from idea to idea, in order to try to discover what the reader might be understanding. In this way, the context might grow beyond a simple personal dialogue into discourse comprehensible to someone who does not live within their heads. Of course, it is with operation 2 that they have the most difficulty, as does any writer. Generally, they begin to recognize gaps or holes between sentences, words left unexplained, ideas left unconnected, and they begin the real writing task of creating contexts by generating fully transferred utterances in what Vygotsky calls external speech.

Working through that process is not easy for anyone, but students enrolled in my regular comp sections seem to gain more and more proficiency as course work goes on. BWs, on the other hand, have tremendous

difficulty, and left unattended, that difficulty never seems to alleviate. Mostly, the writing I see from BWs, in any stage of development, resembles the notes regular comp students take in the very beginning of their run through the writing process; that is, BW, as I have seen it, is written in immediate utterances or in disconnected transferred utterances and therefore resembles the writing-to-oneself of Vygotsky's inner speech. This is one way of restating Shaughnessy's contention that BWs write in "sentences of thought" rather than in "passages of thought," but it is also I believe more directive termirology to use in identifying and analyzing types of BW. The degree to which we find evidence of predication with only a sense of meaning in their writing may determine where along the writing process BWs are, where in the two operations their writing is becoming disrupted. The closer the writing resembles inner speech, the more basic it may be and vice versa.

Now, if you'll refer to the sheet I've handed out, I can explain my analyses.

LEVEL I

Level I writing is, perhaps, the one we see analyzed most frequently. It is the kind of writing that appears, for example, throughout Errors and Expectations. All the usual errors are evident: run-ons and fragments, misspellings, and a lack of inflectional and derivational endings. But in my analysis I take the description one step further and call this a simple transcription of inner speech. These are examples of immediate utterances; the few nominals that appear will be hazy, packed with only a sense of meaning, and the predominant sentencing features are predication and modification. The only rhetorical device used is simple addition.

The significance of such an analysis is that it can tell us that these writers are still writing to themselves, not only because the grammatical errors appear as personal responses to whatever limited training they've received, but because the context is still internal--this is not writing to be read; it is writing to be contemplated and rewritten. This writing, as evidenced by a clear lack of nominals, is barely into operation 1, creation of full nominal-verbal pairs, which indicates to me that it is in a very early stage of development.

LEVEL II

Level II writing is still a transcription of inner speech. It differs from Level I in that Level II writing exhibits nominals inserted, a great many more of them than in Level I. The nominals are still hazy, the use of pronouns, for example, confusing, and given to offering only a sense of meaning. This is the kind of writing, in fact, wherein we are likely to find inflated language, vocabulary that is meant to impress, not to express. Again, predication is the major sentencing device, and simple addition persists as the predominant rhetorical connection.

Operation 1 is complete here; full nominal-verbal pairs appear. but many times they continue in run-ons or in contructions that seems to have lost their way, what Shaughnessy refers to as "syntactic snarls." Operation 2 is beginning, but only beginning in that the context seems still to be in the writers' heads and needs to be externalized by the generation of further nominal-verbal pairs in explanation of the pairs already transcribed.

LEVEL III

In Level III, we see the simple sentence emerge as the primary tool of discourse. Operation 1 is obviously complete--there would

seem to be no immediate utterances here. But what appear here are full transferred utterances of the most basic kind that could be reduced to any one of the four structural patterns. They are sentences, most assuredly, and yet one gets the feeling of "fragment." Why? Because the sentences are simple immediate utterances with nominals and verbals inserted, or they are unconnected, or they are connected only by simple addition. There is little depth and, following, there is little context established for someone outside the writers' heads.

Level III writing is somewhere between operation 1 and operation 2. A context is growing but only because the immediate utterances have been transferred, and nominals, hazy at best, have been inserted. Also, these writers seem to have some control over the predication of inner speech.

LEVEL IV

We are likely to encounter Level II and III writers in regular comp courses, but Level IV writers are almost always enrolled in regular comp. In this kind of writing will appear sentences with some coordination and subordination used as connecting devices. Operation 1 has been completed, the student writer is trying to extend his ideas, but the rhetorical device used is still simple addition. Context is growing, not simply because nominal-verbal pairing is evident, but also because these writers are trying to connect their pairs in an attempt to externalize their contexts. It is not really inner speech, and at the same time, it is not yet external speech, but it is somewhere in between, closer than Level III writing but not quite there yet.

This rather abbreviated description of my analysis demonstrates that there are most certainly different kinds of BW with different characteristics. And yes. In answer to at least one question in

your heads, the categories do mix. However, I have found that generally any sample of writing from one of my BWs will fall into one or another of the levels.

But placement into arbitrary levels of ability is not my primary aim. While it is certainly helpful for us to devise guidelines like labelling comma-splices and fragments, it is more important for us to discover the <u>implications</u> of such devices. As Jerry says in Albee's <u>Zoo Story</u>, "Sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly." I too have had to go through an extended analysis to get to a synthesis. And I hope that <u>you</u> can see now, barring the differences between the levels, that there is something wholly similar in these samples which, I believe, might lead to a definition of what is <u>basic</u> in all writing: and that would be, simply stated, <u>connecting sentences</u>, <u>not</u> writing sentences. It seems to me that it is whatever happens between sentences that is basic to all writing.

My analysis demonstrates, across the board, on every level, the BWs' problem is <u>not</u> with operation 1. While I will not say that they can write sentences, I feel perfectly confident saying that in every sample, even in Level I, there is a <u>sense</u> of sentencing evident in the writers' ability to pair nominal and verbal elements. Each writer can transcribe immediate utterances and each can, even with a minimal amount of instruction, be taught to insert full nominal and verbal elements to construct transferred utterances. In other words, it is obvious to me that these samples come from native speakers of English.

Which leads me to my first conclusion: if every sense of every conceivable sentence pattern is evident, then sentence patterns themselves need only be brought to the students' attention so that full

nominal-verbal pairing might appear in their writing. Teaching the sentence, therefore, as the primary objective in BW is at best redundant and at worst teaching English as a Foreign Language to native speakers. Even Shaughnessy admits the drawback of teaching sentences in response to samples of BW at the end of her course work: ". . .although some students had extended control of their ideas beyond the sentence, most of them were still confined to the sentence as the main field of struggle and concern, a result that may well have reflected the priorities of the writing program rather than any developmental reality [p. 283--my italics]." Furthermore, teaching sentences will only tend to bring inner speech to the scribal surface, and as Vygotsky points out, inner speech is not the language of written discourse.

Very simply stated, the subject of BW should not be grammar or correcting or sentences or exercises. The subject of BW should be writing, the kind of activity that extends and expands sentences and creates meanings and contexts larger than personal voice allows. BW then should be concerned with operation 2, generating nominal-verbal pairs in amplification of the immediate utterances of inner speech. Any other kind of instruction, it seems to me, would abstract any writing problems from their real source: the students' writing itself.

Then, how do I approach instruction in BW? Generally, I don't even mention the word "sentence" until my students have generated enough discourse from which I can talk to them intelligently about what their sentences or non-sentences are or are not doing within the context of the writing itself. And when I do get around to mentioning sentences, I usually begin with a discusssion of the semicolon, the colon or the dash. I try never to begin with terminal marks because I'm interested in teaching them how to continue discourse, not how to

end it. I'm interested in teaching them to discover the relationships between their words as the relationships grow from sentence to sentence. I want them to come to understand how their sentences are connecting.

To Level I writers, I begin by assigning journals sometimes, asking them to reveal their impressions of college life, but mostly I assign them to write summaries of reading assignments they've received in other courses or summaries of newspaper or magazine articles. I askthem to keep in mind that I don't know who they are, nor do I know what they're writing about, so their writing must somehow reveal themselves and their connections with their subject matter. In this way, they must insert all the nominals and begin to externalize a context that I will understand.

I like to ask Level II writers to begin by externalizing personal voice. Generally, I ask them to read newspaper or magazine editorials and then to agree, disagree or both in writing to me, again, to someone who is not familiar with either the writer or the subject. Always, I ask to see drafts of the pieces they're working on before they submit final copies so that I might begin to instill the idea of writing as a process of trial and error and so that I might check the growing connections between their sentences. Most often they will not hand in what could be called "papers" traditionally but what might be termed "discourse blocs, a few snatches of five to ten connecting sentences, the written record of an idea developing, akin to the paragraph but without the usual contextual restrictions that paragraph construction connotes.

When I identify a Level III writer, I immediately start talking about the semicolon or dash as alternatives to the periods they use as their only connecting mark. Generally, these students seem to have

come from highly prescriptive high school programs wherein they had been drilled on parts of speech and sentence patterning. The trouble with them is that they don't know how to write! A phrase borrowed from Dr. Paul Briand of State University of New York College at Oswego describes them well: they are scribal stutterers. After I present the alternative connections symbolized by the semicolon or the dash, I assign them either a response to a magazine essay or a writing assignment specially constructed for BWs--these assignments call for short, concise and intense pieces. When they hand me drafts littered with semicolons and dashes, I ask them to explain why they've used each mark within their contexts to begin our study of sentence expansion and connection.

There's no doubt about it: Level III writers are the most difficult to deal with, which is why I ask them to begin with marks of punctuation, for in the marks of punctuation lies the microcosm of the activity we call writing. When I ask Level III writers to take responsibility for the marks they've used, I'm beginning at the most definitive place at which I can pinpoint exactly how their sentences are connecting or not.

Dealing with Level IV writers can be tricky. Generally, they are enrolled in regular comp sections. On one hand, I might find that they are glorified Level III writers whose stuttering is a bit more sophisticated than the usual. If they continue to use simple addition as their major rhetorical device, I'll ask them to enroll in BW and treat them as Level III writers. But more times than not, the complexity of regular comp assignments forces them to exhibit the more advanced syntactic and rhetorical options in their writing, options that had been hidden somewhere for lack of use.

Of course I do use sentence exercises, but never at the beginning

of the course and always in response to an assignment they've handed to me. Usually, I'll make up an exercise as I go along, one that fits the kind of error that appears in the context of the piece of writing. The exercises I use never treat errors in isolation but only as they affect the rhetorical connections a student is attempting.

And, no, I'll not leave you without the usual before-and-after ad campaign, although that is not the purpose of this paper. Here are some of the results I've obtained from the students who wrote the previous samples:

This Level I piece was written one month after the course began:

"Flagler College--what it means to me. Flagler College is a place where I have no kind of fun only but once in a while. Number 1: I be suppose to be here to play basketball, but most of all to get my work done; then I have a good time. But if I am not happy, how can I have a good time? It seems it not being the college--it's some of the people at the college, like the RA on the third floor who gives my roommates and I trouble all the way, and the basketball coach who I think lied to me about money. I don't know. It is just something about this place I don't get, but someday I will know--I will know."

This Level II piece came in at the end of the semester:

"Now that it is starting to get colder out, and lights are going up all over town, one thing comes to everyones mind--Christmas! There's something about Christmas that makes everybody here happy, maybe because they all know they will be going home to be with their families, or maybe because they won't have to do any school work for a whole month. But for me, I cant wait to go home and see some snow (which you dont see around here)."

This Level III piece also came in near the end of the semester:

"Legend holds that baseball was invented in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839 by Abner Doubleday, but as my searching has shown, this may not have been true. For instance, baseball had many different names at that time: round ball, goal ball, post ball, and town ball. Also, fields were built any size; there was no set number of players. So, An American now giben credit for at least helping the game develop is Alexander Cartwright, who was the first person to set up rules for the game."

The last piece was written by a Level IV writer approximately six weeks into the course. This is a section of a four-page response he wrote to a newspaper editorial about Congressional procrastination:

"Something almost drastic, it seems, is going to have to happen if they hope to meet the December 18 deadline. The main reason for having to meet the deadline is a moratorium protecting 87 million acres of wilderness from ruin. This moratorium was passed by congress in 1971 and expires in December.

"In my opinion, just becuase the senate committee can't seem to get it together by a certain date, the risk of allowing a bunch of money-hungry businessmen to move in and ruin the last totally unspoiled area in the United States seems a little more important than meeting some deadline."

I will not pretend to say that this is great writing; but it is the stuff of great writing, perhaps, more explicitly, it is writing as opposed to the samples I received at the beginning of the course. Nor will I pretend to say that what seems to work for me will work for you. As a matter of fact, I've finished "saying" anything for now. But I will close with a number of requests that may help us to repeal the Basic Writing Act of Writing Sentences:

1) that we look skeptically, if only partially, at what studies and textbooks and magazines say we ought to be teaching in BW;

2) that we investigate the BWs and their writing at our own schools to find some meaning in the stuff in front of us while it's fresh; and

3) that we cease doing things to our BWs, for it is only in doing things for them that we will help them to come to learn about and understand the hidden worlds which their writing can potentially open to them and to us. As Shaughnessy says, "Writing classes must do more than make the BW student a proficient exerciser; for only as a writer can he develop verbal responsiveness to his own thoughts and to the demands of his readers."

LEVELS OF WRITING ABILITY
(Handed out to audience members)

LEVEL I
Sample: Well start at 7:30 that Friday mor got up to go and eat. that same old thing evermoring, and than I went to my first class at 9:0Clock. Than the had day being, and I could just wait unto practic was over and go eat dinner and get on the road to go home. where is home is in flord. and But when I got there.

Characteristics: Inner speech transcribed; immediate utterances; lack of nominals; predication and modification.

LEVEL II
Sample: I have also learn thar men has created a lot systrums to functoin for them, for example the computor, slaves, an d ect, And after they create them they wind up being a part of then any ways. Which is to say. They created then to avoid being part of what they do and only wind up being a part of then any ways, so there was no need for their existence.

Characteristics: Nominals hazy but inserted; "syntactic snarls"; predication; inflated vocabulary.

LEVEL III
Sample: The reason I choose Flager College is because of it's size. The school has only seven-hundred and fifty students. That is pretty small. comparing to my high school. In a small school you know everybody. That is great. Another important fact is their not on the quarter system, their on the semister peried. The semister peried is very good.

Characteristics: Simple sentence emerges; full transferred utterances; nominals inserted and less hazy; control of predication and modification in condensation of patterns.

LEVEL IV
Sample: My impressions of Flagler College is ~~both good and~~ on the whole very good. ~~The Most of my negitive~~ The school definitely meets my needs with small classes, and enrollment, good weather, friendly people, and sufficient dormitories. The St. Augustine area itself is my type surroundings which is calm, peaceful, and old fashioned.

Characteristics: Similar to Level III with the exeeption of more evidence of subordination, sentences connecting.